Losing My Best Friend: The Perils of Animal Bereavement and Grief

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Abstract:

The loss of an animal companion is tough, particularly for individuals who live with mental health challenges and depend on these special relationships as a way to navigate the difficulties of everyday life. However, the ensuing grief from losing a beloved pet remains underexplored in research that seeks to understand human-animal relationships further. In this essay, I reflect on my experience with active grief after the death of my dog and best friend, Bailey. I engage with scientific and cultural considerations surrounding pet loss and bereavement while highlighting the need for more social support and understanding for those who experience pet loss. I advocate for this grief to be centered and not treated as "disenfranchised," as this can result in adverse outcomes and deter post-traumatic growth because of the severe pain of separation and impaired social support. I intentionally offer my experience as evidence as to why it is essential to change attitudes surrounding pet companionship so that individuals who suffer from their loss can share their experiences, find support, cope, and recover confidently.

Author Biography

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"Dogs are not our whole life, but they make our lives whole"- Roger Caras

Despite the popular euphemism, there is nothing good about grief. While it is a natural response to losing a loved one and a part of life, it remains complicated due to its subjectivity. Grief alters feelings, physical sensations, cognitions, and behaviors. Unfortunately, people can suffer in silence when their loss is unrecognized, unsupported, or unvalidated by social norms. This oversight can lead to the pathologization of grief, which further complicates recovery. Such is the case when humans lose their animal companions (pets). Despite the deep physical and emotional bonds, society can perceive it as inferior and dismiss the salience of the relationship. Recent studies confirm that mourning a pet can engender overwhelming emotions, such as remorse, regret, and resentment, making it inherently traumatic. Still, pet loss is categorized as "disenfranchised" by many clinical professionals. Clear evidence exists that animals enhance

human health, but limited studies focus on the impact of losing them. The disenfranchised nature of this grief overlooks how and why human-animal relationships can be therapeutic and profoundly meaningful to their caretakers.

For example, dogs in the Western world are often considered family members and even work in service to humans. Dogs are frequently trained to help people cope with adversity, thus improving health outcomes, as seen in dog-assisted therapy interventions. For instance, canine-assisted court services have proven successful in aiding domestic abuse survivors in testifying against their abusers, offering terrified victims comfort, protection, and strength to confront them within the judiciary. With all the added value dogs offer humans, conducting more empirical research on human-animal interactions (HAI) and individuals who struggle with mental health remains lacking. Culturally, we accept that dogs positively impact our lives by offering stress relief, companionship, physical activity, and countless other benefits. However, when our furry friends pass, it can feel disorienting, overwhelming, and lonely because the public perception is that it is easier to move on from a non-human loss. For this reason, as a society, we must normalize pet bereavement to support vulnerable individuals in processing and centering their grief without judgment or stigma since they have more difficulties doing so when social support is inadequate—an attempt to better understand the (clinically) significant psychological distress after pet loss is urgent.

Grief, with no exception, can undermine our ability to express ourselves. It has a muting effect, so coping with it can be confusing and disordered. Pet loss affects our ability to articulate our feelings because of the invalidating assumption that a non-human loss is somehow less stressful or significant. However, losing a beloved animal companion can feel as catastrophic as any other tragedy because of the intense, unique animal-human bond and the shared unconditional love. In this essay, I offer my experience as evidence to synthesize my grief after losing my best friend, my dog Bailey. I offer my experience as an entry point for further exploring pet bereavement and grief. I also put it in conversation with the scientific and cultural attitudes surrounding pet loss. In this age of modern medicine, I question why I still struggle with the untimely loss of my dog, a miniature schnauzer whose expected life span was no more than twelve to fifteen years. I reflect on why I felt immensely underprepared to accept her death while also reevaluating my subsequent guilt from having to “let her go.”

Ashes for Beauty

When I learned that my dog’s diagnosis was fatal and inevitable, I grabbed my chest in pain in the waiting room. My heart literally and metaphorically hurt in a way that I determined was a result of it breaking. Medically, broken heart syndrome, or takotsubo cardiomyopathy, feels like a heart attack, although it is a temporary condition. It causes your heart muscle to weaken rapidly. A stressful event, like grief, can trigger it. This embodied reaction is another powerful testament to how our bodies and emotions are intertwined. Although devastated by the news and medicated to digest it, I was and still am angry. I feel cheated by life, god, and even the veterinarian who delivered the news of her fate. I had not considered a future without her by my side.

Incredibly, after eight years together, I have never felt such a strong connection with another living being outside the one between my son and me. Bailey and I shared many morning rituals, which included coffee, cuddles, and cartoons. She was so attuned to me that if I

experienced foreboding symptoms of a panic attack, she immediately jumped on my lap to soothe me, consistently offering the emotional support I lacked throughout most of my childhood and alleviating many of the mental health symptoms I struggled with daily. As a child abuse survivor, human relationships can (still) feel unsafe and anxiety-inducing. I am painfully awkward around new people and environments, but this mattered less to me with her. I suffered from clinical depression when she came into my family. Her unabashed joy became infectious. My family joked that she turned me into a “morning person” since I notoriously woke up most days with a scowl. With time, she became more than a service dog; she was and will always be the closest friend I ever had, mirroring many attributes that enhanced my adult life: patience, kindness, and unconditionality. Losing her felt like the newly discovered parts of me that I had learned to love through and with her were also going to die.

Existing research on grief argues that our social support determines how we move forward from the intense pain of losing a pet. My family's support during this time was invaluable. I found solace in the shared memories of Bailey, and the understanding nods were like a balm to my wounded heart. However, I could not help but ask myself, can this type of pain, free from injury or disease, be transient? After all, no one can refill the void left by the departed. Since death is definitive, it felt unbearable. I stayed in bed for days, inconsolable, when she died. I cried for weeks. The juxtaposition of grief with the immense love I felt from my husband and son, who stayed by my side, feeding me and holding my hand so our hearts could syncopate, was breathtaking. It also compelled me to confront what “letting go” meant in the context of living. Bailey and I had to learn to trust each other, strengthening our connection and attachment. Research on pet loss tends to focus on its impact on children, noting how difficult it is for them to overcome it. However, science suggests that pet loss is hard on children because it is usually their first experience with death and grief. Weirdly, this loss felt like a first. As I am writing this, my eyes still swell with tears.

As adults, the advent of sudden death forces us to seriously reevaluate our time on earth, especially when we know that our systems of technological medical care cannot meet our needs and desires to prolong life indefinitely. This helplessness makes for feeling vulnerable and desperate. I recently ran across the story of Sarma Melngailis, former owner of the New York City vegan restaurant “Pure Food and Wine.” Netflix documented her story in *Bad Vegan: Fame. Fraud. Fugitives* (2022). It centers on how Antony Strangis, a.k.a Shane Fox, duped Sarma into embezzling over 1.6 million dollars from her restaurant into their personal bank accounts with the promise of obtaining immortality for her dog. As fantastic and impossible as his promise was, she believed him and was willing to suspend her better judgment and common sense. I have never felt such empathy for someone as I did for her in her pursuit of the same thing I wanted, more than anything, for my dog to have eternal life.

Due to the pressures of everyday life, the countless deadlines and hustle, and our collective aspirations for “more,” we tend to carry on as if there is an endless supply of time to spend on earth and as if our loved ones will be perpetually available. This purposeful misguidedness obstructs our perspective and causes us to take so much for granted, especially the little things that enhance our lives. I wish I had taken longer walks with Bailey and shared more steaks, lazy days, and weekends. I regret the hours I spent doing anything and everything that did not involve my loyal confidante. I resent my choices despite knowing I spent nearly every hour I could with her by my side. It will never feel as if we had enough time together. I will

always feel bitter about what I perceive as a cruel and unjust fate for such a loyal and devoted friend. This grief is honed in the adage that life is not always fair.

All Animals Grieve

Anthropologist Barbara King argues that humans grieve because we are "social animals." Her research underscores how animals like elephants, cows, ducks, and dogs display "evident distress" upon losing someone they love. She cites various ethnologists who documented "profound emotion" in surviving animals when a mate, family member, or friend is dying or dies. However, despite knowing how unexceptional grief is within the animal kingdom, losing Bailey still feels extraordinary. Studies reveal that the emotional connection between humans and animals is similar to the emotional bond between humans.

The stages of grief are disorganized and can be passive or active. Passive grief can accentuate the feeling of victimization, while the latter empowers and enables a path forward where you can healthily express the grief. Fittingly, when you choose active grief, you are choosing life. Because of my *entorno* (social environment) growing up, I developed "extraordinary" creative *and* destructive capacities to function. However, when I got my emotional support animal, daily life felt more effortless and lighter. I did not have to mask the idiosyncrasies of my condition; with her, I was able to experience radical acceptance despite my traumas.

My upbringing forced me to rely on myself, even as a child, so the need and desire to become involved with others as an adult did not feel compulsory. This personal disconnect is typical of survivors of chronic trauma who balance trust with self-protectiveness. Keeping most people at a safe distance was essential to my survival, which made me an incredibly lonely and isolated child. One Christmas, I received a stuffed animal from the local church. I took it everywhere and had long conversations with it, too. I remember praying it would come to life so I would not be alone. Eventually, my sister threw it out, and although I missed it, I was not allowed to complain about a thrown-away toy. Over thirty years later, I let Bailey's fur grow out overly long, as she had missed a grooming appointment, and I glanced at her and realized she looked exactly like the childhood toy I loved so much. I remember holding her so close with gratitude that she had come into my life. My inner child felt heard by a higher power who often made me feel forgotten.

After eight years with no health issues, Bailey's unknown illness and rapid decline were unexpected. I carried her in my arms to the vet, never thinking that she would not return home. After teaching medical ethics for more than a decade, the concept of a good death (euthanasia) became no longer abstract or theoretical. The veterinarian ran tests, and when she returned with "bad news," I felt like I was in a movie. I could hear her, but nothing she said made sense. While our collective goal for her care was to prevent suffering, it felt like we were also de-facto "executioners." Since quality of life is not an objective discernment, my decision to let her go in peace came down to me not wanting her to suffer, even if it meant that I was going to have to as a result. The vet observed my distress and tried to let me know that what I was doing was humane, ethical, and loving. I did not make it easy for her because she, too, started to cry and hugged me as I crumbled, sobbing in her office.

Recent studies suggest that people who feel ignored because of "disenfranchised grief" can also feel deprived of the right to share their feelings or to receive acknowledgment and

sympathy. I tend to be a “walk it off” type who can power through like a workhorse to (over) perform. Still, with Bailey’s loss, I experienced myself as “passive and helpless,” which felt foreign and infuriating. However, as “choiceless” as her death felt, I decided to let her go because I loved her so much. My immediate reaction was to blame myself, which I know is an all too familiar trauma response. While self-blame is an acceptable response from a child who conceives themselves as the center of the world, it also aligns with the thought processes of traumatized people of all ages who blame themselves to make sense of what has happened to them. The truth is that even when a death is foreseen or welcomed, it still hurts. However, I could not withstand extending her suffering because of my selfish desire to keep her for as long as I could with me. It was the sacrifice I had to make.

Grieving is a process, not an event. It must be active for the recovery to bring the mourning person back to their original state. My default setting before Bailey was sad and anxious, which is the lived reality of patients like me diagnosed with Complex post-traumatic disorder (CPTSD.) Scholars note that conceiving the grieving process as active is preferable because it promotes self-understanding and helps chart a path forward. Accordingly, successful grieving makes it possible for the bereaved to remember without intense pain and anguish and to “cherish” memories rather than being “overwhelmed” by them. I know I need to hold on to the memories of Bailey and me running on the beach without breaking down. Instead, I should be uplifted by our time together.

As Bailey transitioned to the unknown, I sang to her through tears and held her tightly. The sparkle in her eye dimmed; she was tired, and I wanted her to rest. I had an entire repertoire of songs I made up and would sing to her as she would smile and sigh, communicating her content. Amid my suffering, I recalled how singing guides the deceased’s journey to the afterlife within many death rituals. I have always found this idea encouraging. So I sang to her through tears while my husband expressed his gratitude and cheered her on like she had scored the winning penalty goal against France. As she took her last breath, I thanked her. We surrounded her with the love she gave us and promised to remember her fondly forever. I hold on to the childhood belief that all dogs must go to heaven because if not, there is none to look forward to. Bailey taught me that the only way to mend a broken heart is to open it up to more love. As I actively grieve, I will continue to remember her in song, with love, and I am eternally grateful for the life she gave me. I will memorialize her by choosing kindness, no matter my circumstance, and by telling our story…this story.